

Guidelines for Translation Projects

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The following statement serves as a common set of expectations for Bible translation work carried out by SIL. They have been created with reference to the [FOBAI Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation](#) (FBPP), to which SIL is committed, and express how these are interpreted within SIL. These principles may be applied in different ways depending upon the particular translation situation.

All Scripture material produced or approved by SIL must also follow the [SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms](#).

These guidelines flow from our understanding that producing a faithful and useful translation - one that individuals and communities will genuinely use - is a complex task. It requires collaboration between multiple stakeholders, the combination of a variety of different skill sets, and sustained effort over a substantial period of time. These guidelines are designed to help navigate some of this complexity. They are intended to be used alongside other guidance for SIL language projects on topics such as Scripture Engagement, literacy, publishing and project management.

For the purposes of this document, Bible translation is divided into 4 segments: [Planning](#), [Team](#), [Process](#) and [Publication](#). A short rationale will be given for each guideline.

1. Planning

When planning a translation project, **broad and meaningful involvement of the local community** is essential, to the extent that people are able and willing to participate. This includes seeking local financial sustainability, as far as this is possible. Trust-building and community advocacy form part of the work from the outset and continue throughout the life of the project. Where possible, connections with diaspora speakers of the language are also encouraged, as these can bring additional benefits.

Rationale: Ideally, the community should own and lead the project, and support it as much as possible through local resourcing. The project should meet the needs of the community. One possible outcome of this could be the establishment of a committee or oversight board. There are some contexts where the local community cannot or will not be involved, and in these contexts translation can be a service to the community. More guidance on planning is available in the [Planning Refresh](#) guide.

Community Involvement

Effective translation projects include discussions from the beginning amongst **the community and other stakeholders** about:

- which languages are used by people in the community, where and when they are used, and by whom (including those living in diaspora contexts),
- what kinds of Scripture products they already have (in any of the languages they use) and which further products they desire to have in these languages (including whether these will be written, oral or signed),

- how they expect to use these products, and the difference they hope they will make for the community,
- what the community's broader development goals are, and how the translation contributes to those,
- what translation *media* (eg. audio, print, and/or video) and *style* (eg. more formal or more meaning based) is most appropriate,
- who will be involved in the project,¹ and
- what other foundational language activities are needed alongside the project (such as alphabet design, grammatical analysis or literacy work).

Document these discussions in a **translation brief** (templates are available [here](#)) so that everyone knows what the goals are, and so that they can be referred to and updated throughout the project. The Multilingualism Assessment Tool (<https://sites.google.com/sil.org/mat>) and 'the Journey' (<https://sites.google.com/sil.org/thelanguageidentityjourney/the-journey>) can both help facilitate this process.

Rationale: A translation project has the greatest chance of achieving the community's desired goals if they are based on an informed understanding of the context, and if everyone involved is clear from the beginning about what they are trying to do, why they are doing it (the purpose of translation) and the expectations of different stakeholders.

Church involvement

When planning a translation project, **meaningful involvement of the Church** is a foundational part of the process, to the extent that it is able and willing to participate. This engagement extends, wherever possible, across the denominations and expressions of the Church within the community, and includes appropriate regional and/or national leadership. In contexts where no local church is present, alternative strategies may be identified and pursued. At times, a local expression of the Church may not recognise the intended audience for the translation, or may hesitate to engage with them. In such situations, the team has an active role in advocating for that community within the Church and in developing other appropriate ways of engaging the intended audience.

Rationale: Translations are more likely to be used by churches that have been meaningfully involved in their development. If all churches and denominations are valued and included in the project, the product is more likely to be used widely across denominations. There are some contexts where local churches or denominations cannot or will not want to be involved.

Involvement of other organisations

When planning a translation project, **involve other organizations (strategic partners and interested stakeholders)**, in as much as they are willing and able, with considerations to the safety of staff and community in sensitive contexts.

Rationale: Proactive communication between organisations may avoid duplication of effort and allows resources to be shared. In sensitive contexts this sharing might be limited or nonexistent.²

¹ Cf. FBPP 9

² For more details on working with others, please see SIL's [Philosophy of Partnership](#).

Scripture engagement

When planning a translation project, **include activities that engage communities with the Scriptures as they are planned and produced.** A Scripture engagement specialist can contribute by helping the team and community understand the audience and its needs, explore appropriate strategies, and promote a people-centred approach that prioritises transformation. Their input can provide valuable insight and should be included from the beginning whenever possible. Many ideas and resources can be found at <https://scripture-engagement.org/>, <https://emdc.guide>, <https://emdc.tools/> and through SIL's [Ethnoarts site](#).

Rationale: Churches and communities are more likely to use a finished translation product for their discipleship and ministry goals if they have been using it throughout the translation process. Creating environments in which the community can use the Bible as it is translated, and a variety of products that connect with the intended audience, can encourage the discipling of believers, development of literacy skills, and foster local ownership.

Regular review

Translation Projects need **regular review and adjustment of their goals and translation brief** in the light of the progress of the project and changing context of the community.

Rationale: This ensures that the project is current and relevant, and the community and local church is engaged.

2. Team

Successful translation projects require a variety of skills and perspectives. Although sometimes one or two people may have all the skills between themselves, more often the competencies are spread amongst different members of the team, who each contribute their gifts to the overall success.

1. All team members need to have a **learner mindset, striving to work together well and resolve conflict**, continuing to grow and learn in any areas where they are weak.

Rationale: The attitudes and interpersonal relationships amongst team members have a significant impact on the success of a translation project.

2. Translation teams need to be **as multifaceted in composition as possible**, seeking to reflect the intended audience in their diversity of age, gender, backgrounds, denominations, dialects and geographical spread. Members of the translation team should have good standing with the intended audience.

Rationale: A well-rounded team that includes as many sub-segments of the intended audience as possible will increase the likelihood of acceptance and use of the translation. If a translator is not respected, this can result in the translation also not being respected.

3. Someone on the team needs to have **sufficient competence in handling the backgrounds, genres, themes and theology of the Bible to help the team access information and arrive at an understanding of a biblical text in its original literary, historical and cultural context.**

Rationale: Good biblical understanding and exegetical methods help ensure that the translation remains true to the original context and is not distorted by other biases.³

³ Cf. FBPP 5

- Someone on the team needs to **understand how the source and receptor languages differ and be able to help the team map structures in the source language to those in the receptor language.**

Rationale: The team needs to handle the linguistics of the source languages (whether original biblical languages or languages of wider communication) and the receptor language responsibly and appropriately. Linguistic understanding helps avoid just copying source language structures, which can result in miscommunication. It is also necessary when structures in the source languages are not available in the receptor language.

- Someone on the team needs to be **able to provide guidance on translation issues such as balancing accuracy and naturalness, handling cultural mismatches, unknown concepts and figurative language, translating key terms, and using a translation style consistent with the translation brief.**

Rationale: The team needs to be able to handle difficult passages effectively in the receptor language.

- Someone on the team needs to **be competent in the receptor language and understand the receptor culture well.**

Rationale: This ensures that the translation is natural and culturally appropriate.

- At least one person on the team needs to be able to **access exegetical resources and understand the receptor language well.**

Rationale: This enables the team to check that the translation in the receptor language is actually saying what it needs to say.

- Translation projects should **utilize experts recognised by the community and technical specialists (who may be invited from outside) in order to help in specific domains as necessary;** e.g. church leaders, along with specialists in orthography, linguistics, literacy, Scripture engagement, language technology, and the biblical languages

Rationale: This allows the team to get the help, resources and consultation they need along the way.

3. Process

The process outlined below focuses on the specific steps of translation. Other foundational linguistic work may need to be carried out before and alongside the project (as identified during the planning stage), such as developing effective writing systems, analysing the grammar or strengthening literacy.

Translation consultants provide valuable input throughout the process, such as training in exegesis, technology and translation, and supporting teams to develop effective translation processes in line with the translation brief.

Although the steps are listed consecutively below, the process will normally be iterative, consisting of cycles of drafting, review and revision. The testing and review steps with church and community may occur in different orders in different contexts.

The translation process includes understanding, translating and checking:

Understanding

1. **Exegesis: The team understands the Biblical text using exegetical resources.**⁴

Rationale: The team needs to know how to interpret the Biblical text and background, and carry out exegesis of the meaning of the passage in its original context. Using resources helps the team become aware of biblical and theological issues they might not otherwise have identified. This ensures that the translation is grounded in careful exegesis and well-supported interpretations of the text. Even if AI is used to help with drafting, the translators still need to study the meaning of the passage themselves so they will be ready to critique the AI draft.

2. **Internalization: The team internalizes the passage.** Internalizing involves mentally processing the passage to the point that the translators are able to tell the passage as if it were their own experience.

Rationale: This contributes to a natural translation. Even if AI is used to help with drafting, the humans on the team need to have internalized the passage in order to check the accuracy of the AI output.

Translating

3. **Drafting: Team members who are fluent users of the receptor language retell the passage in their own language** and the team records it in appropriate media (whether text, audio and/or video). If AI is used in the drafting, the output needs to be checked very carefully. We recommend using AI-generated content as a reference alongside other resources, rather than a first draft.

Rationale: This is the heart of translation. Although AI tools can be very helpful for quickly producing natural sounding translations, the output can often sound convincing yet be inaccurate. AI drafts may also miss the rich features of the language, and are improved by human editing.

4. **Preparing supporting materials. The team creates supporting materials for the passage**, such as headings, footnotes, study notes, book introductions, pictures, maps and glossary entries.

Rationale: Supporting materials help the intended audience to understand what is being communicated in the passage. Preparing them at this stage allows them to be included in the checking process.

Checking

5. **Team exegetical checking and revising:** The drafter and at least one other team member **check the draft translation for accuracy** using source languages, literal versions in languages of wider communication and other exegetical resources, and make any necessary changes.

Rationale: The internalising and drafting stages can produce a natural first draft, but it

⁴ Some useful resources include [SIL Translator's Notes](#), UBS Translator's Handbooks and the [FIA resources](#), as well as AI tools like [Faithbridge](#). Collections of quality resources can be accessed through [Translator's Workplace](#) in Logos, [Paratext](#) and [Translation Insights and Perspectives](#). Interacting with others in a [Bible translation community of practice](#) is another way to explore the meaning of a passage.

may have missed some elements, added something, or changed some of the meaning. An exegetical check helps ensure the draft is indeed faithful to the original. Including more than one person helps find issues the drafter might have missed.

6. **Text and media quality review:** The team runs **software-based automated checks** on the text (such as spelling and punctuation checks) or a check of the sound or video quality, depending on the modality of the product.

Rationale: This helps find and correct consistency, formatting, spelling, or recording errors in the product. It is helpful to do this before sharing the translation for wider input.

7. **Church and community leader provide feedback:** **Church leaders and/or community leaders provide feedback on the translation**, in as much as they are able and willing, for the team to evaluate and respond to.

Rationale: This provides valuable input on the translation and also builds investment in the translation from the church throughout the translation process, which increases the likelihood that the product will be used.

8. **Community testing and revising:** The team checks the translation with **the wider community** in a variety of settings.

Rationale: This ensures that the translation is communicating clearly, naturally and acceptably to the intended audience.

9. **Preparing for a consultant check:** If the consultant does not know the language of the translation, the team:

- a. **ensures the consultant has access to the meaning of the translation in a language they understand.** This may be achieved through a written back translation, an oral back translation, or by using interlinear tools.
- b. **checks the back translation.** This might involve checking that the back translation does accurately represent the translation, checking the glosses in an interlinear, and/or checking the back translation for any unexpected differences from the source text or a literal version in a language of wider communication. If any issues are found, the translation may need to be revised at this point.

Rationale: The consultant requires a reliable window into the translation to provide effective feedback. Whether through written text, oral retelling, or the interlinear, ensuring this "window" is accurate allows the consultant to focus on exegetical and linguistic issues rather than inaccuracies in the back translation, and may highlight issues that the team needs to address at this stage.

10. **Consultant check and revising:** The team seeks input from a qualified **translation consultant**. As outlined in the [FOBAI Translation Consultant Qualifications](#), this person has significant experience in Bible translation and strong exegetical and people skills. The consultant brings an additional perspective on a team's translation, and provides training as necessary. The consultant helps the team ensure the quality of the translation by comparing it with the original source texts, asking the team about the process used, checking how passages are understood by others in the community, and confirming whether the translation is following the brief.

Rationale: The translation benefits from the experience and expertise of a consultant, who helps to ensure that the translation is adequate for its intended purpose and meets stakeholder expectations.

11. **Endorsement by the receptor community:** Members of the receptor community (including representatives of local churches where possible) have the opportunity to read, listen to or watch the final translation, in order to approve the translation for use.

Rationale: This allows the church and community to have the final say on the translation, and to seek consensus that it is ready for wider sharing.

4. Publication

Consider all the elements of the product's **design and distribution** at an early stage of translation. Work with the community, publication coordinators and other stakeholders to ensure the translation will meet expectations, and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of different partners involved in publishing. Remember to check the [SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms](#).

Since publication guidelines differ considerably from context to context and depend whether the product is text, audio or video, only a brief summary is given here.

All projects need to consider:

- Stewarding the rights of those who contribute to the project and the rights of others to use the products themselves;
- Platform and design choices, whether digital or physical;
- Quality control before distribution (such as completing the Paratext Project Plan checklist);
- Pricing, marketing and promotion.

Further considerations for printed scripture include:

- Choice of pictures;
- Layout, cover and interior design;
- Formatting decisions and proofing;
- Printing, warehousing, shipping and points of sale.

Rationale: The design, promotion and distribution of the physical or digital product strongly influences how the community perceives and engages with the translation.

All publications need to **have a copyright statement and a licensing statement** that applies to all the different elements of the publication. For SIL SCOs, these need to be in alignment with SIL's publication guidelines, including archiving the text along with any associated metadata and agreements. Scripture should normally also be added to the Digital Bible Library. More information can be found in [SIL's Scripture Publishing Manual](#). Any local publishing procedures should also be followed.

Rationale: This acknowledges those who worked on a product and gives the community the appropriate authority to use the product, while safeguarding the ability to reprint.

Finished material should be shared as soon as possible.

Rationale: This allows the community and leaders to use the product in different settings and give feedback on various aspects, e.g. standardisations and key terms. It also builds anticipation for what is to come and may lead to additional community participants and partners.

Useful links and guidelines from other domains

- [FOBAI Basic Principles and Procedures](#)
- [FOBAI Statement of Qualifications for Translation Consultants](#)
- [SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms](#)
- [SIL Scripture Publishing Manual](#)
- [Linguistic Competencies for Translators](#) (other languages available [here](#))
- [Ethnoarts best practices](#)

Document history

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